

Disaster Preparedness Guidelines for Employers

Guidance on Human Resource Issues that could arise during an event

**Modification from the Kentucky Hospital Association*

Disaster preparedness plans must address the human component in organizations. Guidelines are provided for responsibility structure, staffing, contingent human resource (HR) policies, and after disaster actions. The severity and duration of the disaster will determine which of the guidelines to use.

Responsibility Structure

Because we must be concerned equally about caring for our employees and protecting our employer a "responsibility structure" should be devised so that all affected managers, HR leaders and individuals in other key functions noted are clear on who is responsible for what once it is determined employees are safe and are ready to start back to work.

Managers/Supervisors

Role: To closely monitor performance levels of all employees and refer to support professionals to facilitate early problem solving.

Human Resources Managers

Role: To assist managers with early problem detection, evaluate employee issues and refer to support professionals.

Employee Assistance Counselors

These individuals include staff members and independent contractors brought in to assist due to the large number of cases.

Role: To provide professional counseling for employees who may need assistance with personal problems, stress management, etc., and refer employees as necessary for outside assistance.

- Conduct and/or attend debriefing or tension-reducing sessions whenever possible.
- Advise senior HR managers regarding overall company trends or problems.
- Educate managers/supervisors and HR staff about early problem detection and intervention techniques.

Employee Health

Role: To provide assistance and/or referrals to employees who have general health complaints.

Responsibilities:

- Provide medical attention to referred employees experiencing health problems.
- Refer employees who need counseling to employee assistance counselors.
- Advise HR representatives/Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselors about problems or trends developing in departments.

- Offer assistance to departments or individuals, including techniques for stress-reduction and self-help.

Corporate Communications

Role: To communicate with employees, media and other key audiences quickly, accurately and consistently. The goal should also be to communicate as comprehensively as possible and to encourage two-way communication.

Responsibilities:

- Sensitize leadership and HR to internal and external communication issues, especially those related to the safety of employees and the reputation of the organization.
- Work with senior leaders in advance of the disaster to determine who will be the voice of the organization to external media and who will communicate to employees, and provide media training as needed.
- Maintain an up-to-date media list and also regularly meet with local media, especially local radio and TV newscasters whose stations have their own news gathering departments, and discuss how you will work together in a crisis.
- Keep up-to-date fact sheets about the organization, including stock photos and videos.
- Partner with HR and IT to develop and maintain telephone trees that include home telephone numbers as well as cell phone numbers and personal e-mail addresses so you can notify employees quickly as well as continue to communicate with them.
- Coordinate with safety/security to include communications, especially employee communications, in their plans, procedures and policies.
- Clarify roles among the communications staff, especially around internal and external communications and shifts of operations.
- Be ready to intervene if managers or supervisors or others in the organization may be experiencing difficulties disseminating misinformation.
- Schedule debriefing meetings to assess how well messages are getting through, what else needs to be communicated and what other communication actions are needed.
- Regularly test the crisis communication plan and, either as part of the test or separately, remind employees of the actions they need to take both at work and at home if a disaster strikes.
- Regardless of what else you do, ban the following common phrases from your post-disaster formal and informal communications.
 - "We've returned to normal." No, a new sense of normalcy is being created. People will never be able to recover exactly what they lost.
 - "The healing process is over." No, everyone heals differently and on different schedules. Some may take years to heal, depending on their prior experiences and the trauma they went through this time. Others may bounce back immediately.

- "The disaster is behind us." No, things can still come out of the woodwork months and years later depending on the nature of the event. It's more accurate to say, "The worse is behind us. Here's what we're doing to recover...."

Staffing

Disasters are no time for silo thinking or operating. Leaders need to work together across functional lines to take care of managers, employees and the organization.

The goal of any emergency staffing plan is to reassign workers to areas of greatest need during a disaster. You will want requests for help coming to you at a central point so chaos and confusion surrounding the staffing function can be kept to a minimum. You will need a process to quickly identify workers, to contact them, and to send them wherever they can help. HR's primary role will be to take and fill requests for staff.

In a disaster, there is no "business as usual". Nonessential work units might shut down because of the emergency situation, or because leaders decide to deploy employees to support vital operations.

Your emergency plan will help your facility stay open in the event of a disaster and promote quick restoration of day-to-day functions. With proper preparation, you will be able to fill every demand for workers, using the tools in your emergency staffing plan. You can use the following components to create a plan that fits your own organization.

- Define your mission, being careful to keep the scope manageable. Example: To collect available staff and volunteers at a central point, to receive requests and to assign available staff as needed. Maintain adequate numbers of key types of personnel.
- Collect the names and contact numbers of every person in human resources. You'll need this to call in enough help to carry out your plan in the event of an emergency. Set up a mechanism for keeping that list current.
- Identify primary and backup locations for your emergency staffing operations. You'll need plenty of phones, computers and workspace. Are there already good locations, like a call-in center with equipment to handle multiple incoming and outgoing calls? If not, are there spots that have extra phone and data jacks, or wireless computer connections?
- Identify primary and backup locations where available staff and volunteers can report to work. Consider space, comfort, security and emergency power. Will they be near or in the same locations as your emergency staffing operation, or is there some other key location it should be near?
- Identify potential external staffing resources and compile a list of contacts. Does your organization have branches in other locations? Are there schools that train for key skills whose students might be tapped for temporary help? Are there temporary staffing agencies you could call upon?

- Create an emergency HR management structure and write role descriptions for each position. Keep your emergency organization chart simple, and write the “job action sheets” with the intention they will be used in a highly stressful situation. The Hospital Emergency Incident Command System (HICS) describes job action sheets as “position job descriptions which have a prioritized list of emergency response tasks”. They also serve as reminders of the lines of reporting and promote the documentation of the incident.
- Critical situations may call for an individual to perform multiple tasks until additional support arrives. Any HR professional can do that with the use of position checklists. The roles in a plan can include a:
 - Labor Pool Unit leader: Establishes the Labor Pool Unit and assigns all other roles. Functions as the primary HR contact and reports staffing progress to organizational leaders.
 - Physical Environment Coordinator: Assists with computer setups (including printers) and helps troubleshoot everything for HR staff. Secures office supplies as needed, arranges physical space and posts signs to help workflow. Provides copies of campus or building maps to help individuals find their way to their assigned work area (or to indicate places to avoid).
 - Workforce Coordinator: Fills requests for staff. It's best to split this up into two roles: One receives requests while the other identifies individuals to fill needs. Come up with key categories of employees that make sense for your organization. Doing so allows you to more easily sort employees with common skills, divide the work of the HR staff into limited groups on which they can concentrate, and report on progress toward filling staffing needs more logically to leadership.
 - Credentialing Staff: Carries out emergency credentialing processes.
 - Support Service Assistants: Assign as many as you need to carry out work delegated from the other roles. The number needed will vary during different phases of the disaster. They might make calls to employees' homes (off hours), contact supervisors to reassign nonessential staff and process “walk-ins” at the central staffing location.
- Create a system to manage and report data. Use software you already have to build a database loaded with names, contact information and job titles of all your employees. Create data screens to enter volunteer (non-employee) information and to update availability status when you contact each person or assign them to a work area.
- Consider what you will need if your network is down (copy the database onto CDs) or if you have no electricity (store printouts of comprehensive reports to work from just in case).
- Review your current labor contracts and policies. Plan now for communicating which work rules are suspended in an emergency and how to communicate all of that

information to supervisors and employees. Do you have a payroll backup plan in case your normal systems go down?

- Set up a system to accept temporary help from people who have skills that will help you carry out your tasks during an emergency. They could be non-employees, or employees who don't typically carry out these essential roles but are capable of doing so if you need them. If credentials are required, set up a way to verify those in an emergency.
- Create forms to help HR staff document their activities during the emergency.
- Create forms for HR staff to record staffing requests, and note when those are filled.
- Create forms to help HR staff communicate problems to their leaders, including space to record how those problems were resolved.
- Identify communication and training needs. Your communication plan should answer the following questions:
 - What is the mission?
 - How will the emergency staffing function be activated, and by whom?
 - What can employees expect when they report to help out in an emergency?

When you think you have a good plan, share an overview (one-page summary) and details of each component with a group of HR staff representing all areas that might be called in to help. Ask them "what would you want to have handed to you to tell you what to do in an emergency?" Their responses will give you useful feedback.

Don't get bogged down imagining all types of disaster scenarios and planning to deal with each one. As long as you have built in all the components listed, your emergency staffing plan will have a strong base.

During the crisis, you can adjust one or more components to meet any circumstance. When the call comes in asking you to find staff during a disaster, you will be ready to respond.

CONTINGENT HR POLICIES

The basic policies to consider are those for meeting employees' immediate needs once they and their families are safe: policies surrounding pay and benefits and the return to work.

Paychecks

How will you physically pay employees, especially if they've relocated and do not use direct deposit? Can you give pay statements and checks to managers at specified delivery locations? Or do you set up a conveniently located pickup center (or centers)? Managers should take the responsibility for ensuring that employees receive their pay statements or checks in a timely fashion. So you will be able to cut and deposit checks, be sure to develop backup and contingency plans for payroll processing, including delivery of statements and checks.

You could lose all of your records in a flood, hurricane, or fire, so plan ahead. If you use an outside payroll service, plan for the ability to recapture input and uploads so that you can pay people as quickly as possible according to your schedule. If you do your own payroll processing, give serious thought to your means of data capture and backup so all will not be lost in case your computers, disks, servers, and the like become unusable.

Employee Wages

Continuation of employee wages is one of the most significant items to plan for in advance. To what extent will you pay people if they are not able to work for a period of time?

How long can you afford to pay exempt employees, and hourly workers? Make these decisions now as part of your business continuity plan, so that when something serious happens, you can quickly get the word out to employees.

In your planning, you should consider alternative pay arrangements. Examples might include continuing to pay employees who are unable to report to work because the state or local government has closed the roads, or those who, due to other transportation problems, cannot physically get to work or to an alternative work location.

You might also give employees the option to use vacation time or days from their "paid time off", even if the use of such time generally requires people to give advance notice.

Hazard Pay

As part of your business continuity planning, think about the extent to which you will need employees to come back to work as soon as possible to restore key services to meet customer needs. Will you need to provide hazard pay to acknowledge that these people may be risking their lives to enter and work in a danger zone? And to what degree do overtime pay and hazard pay count toward employee benefits, such as life insurance and 401(k) contributions?

Regardless of your philosophy and decisions, you need to notify employees as quickly as possible as to how you plan to manage their pay during the disaster or emergency period.

Finally, if you require employees to continue working (or make a special plea for them to continue), you should not only consider providing them with regular pay, overtime pay as earned, and hazardous-duty pay, but also plan on reimbursing all reasonable expenses, such as transportation and any extra costs employees may incur because of the situation.

Continuation of Benefits

You also need to think about how employees will use their benefits, especially their health care, during an emergency or disaster. What if employees need medical treatment but can't easily get to a network provider or obtain the proper advance authorizations? What if employees don't have their medical ID cards with them?

What if they're stuck at a worksite without their prescription medicines? What if an employee's eyeglasses break or become lost? HR needs to develop procedures for cutting through the red tape to get employees the medical care they need.

Timekeeping

If timekeeping is important in your organization, managers – or others – must assume responsibility for ensuring that employees properly record their work hours. If you change payroll distribution sites, you'll need to announce the new locations for picking up and delivering timekeeping materials. You should also plan for any special accounting that may be necessary for insurance claim purposes. This generally will require its own documentation.

Work Reassignment

Depending on the situation, you may need to reassign work roles. Employees should be alerted to the new roles as soon as possible. In some cases, you may need to request that employees remain available during regular working hours so they can report to work immediately once you are ready to resume operations.

Family Considerations

Keeping your staff in place beyond their normal shifts or transferring them to other locations to care for residents, may create anxiety and care issues for their own families. Develop a plan to care for families of employees to enable them to remain in place without worrying about their children, spouses, elderly parents, and pets. Each employee should have their own family plan to bring members back together, stay in communication and maximize safety and comfort. Each employee will need to know what assistance the facility can offer. For example: Designate an area within the facility for children and family members to gather. Arrange for food, water, sleeping arrangements and other comforts for the period your staff is required to stay in place. Consider elder care needs, medications, pet care and transportation. Remember that workers need to rest too. Keeping them, well with family lives in balance, will allow them to focus on the emergency tasks at hand.

Employee Assistance and Behavioral Health Programs

Leaders and employees, especially these who have never experienced a disaster, may think they can go it alone both personally and at their jobs without professional help. However, it's best to mitigate both short- and long-term risks by making such help available.

Returning to Work

Some disasters and emergency situations may be so traumatic that employees become apprehensive about returning to work. In these cases, employees have the opportunity to request a leave of absence, according to state and federal leave requirements, and this should be a part of the organization's leave-of-absence policy. In addition, HR and management should direct affected employees to the Employee Assistance Program. If no EAP exists, you should consider bringing in professionals on a temporary or ad hoc basis to help employees deal with the crisis.

When an employee announces that he or she will not be returning to work, the employee's manager and the HR representative need to establish whether the employee is voluntarily resigning or should be offered a personal leave of absence. In the former case, you should establish a time frame under which a voluntary resignation would occur (such as five days after an employee fails to report to work).

In instances where an employee fears working in the building or location where the incident occurred, you should make a reasonable effort to transfer the employee. However, if the business needs require that the employee work in the building, with no alternative, the manager (or HR) has to notify the employee of the organization's inability to accommodate a transfer, and of the implications. Both the manager and HR staff member should encourage the employee to use EAP resources.

Reimbursement for Lodging and Related Expenses

You may need to secure lodging for employees who are unable to return home following a disaster – a hotel room, apartment, or other form of temporary housing. The policy statement should establish a reasonable time frame for reimbursing expenses based on the scope of the disaster and the organization's ability to pay.

Employees who are temporarily homeless may face numerous other issues that can hinder their ability to focus on work, even when they're ready to return. For example, an employer may be separated from his or her spouse and children, who have relocated to another area temporarily or may not have work clothes.

Other Policies

Interim policies should be developed for the following areas:

- Flexible Working Hours. Flextime can be helpful in meeting employees' personal needs and also in managing resources.
- Expense Reimbursement. HR and senior leaders should determine what guidance they will give to managers and employees concerning the types of reasonable expenses eligible for reimbursement in an emergency.
- Recognition. If you have recognition policies or a special program, review it to determine how well it may be expected to work when a disaster strikes.
- Dress Code. Give some thought to a dress code appropriate to the situation.
- Availability of HR Staff. The HR team needs to develop procedures for HR staff to be available to both managers and employees to assist them with any issues or questions they may have.
- Contributions From Other Employees. Employees who aren't personally inconvenienced by the disaster may be willing to help out their co-workers. Consider the extent to which you will allow employees to make cash contributions, donate food and clothing, adjust their schedules to cover for employees who can't work, or give up vacation time.

After the Disaster Guidelines for Employees

Managing Stress

If you are ever a victim of a disaster, you can expect to experience after-effects to varying degrees, and they can last anywhere from six weeks to three months or more.

There can be a ripple effect through your family and other loved ones. The acknowledgement of emotional reactions helps shorten recovery time and prevent complications. Reactions can vary widely from one day to the next. Don't be alarmed by the reemergence of emotions after days or weeks.

Some Reactions You May Experience

- A sense that your life is out of balance
- Disbelief
- Repeated flashbacks
- Excessive sadness
- Repeated nightmares and other sleep disturbances
- Withdrawal from usually pleasurable activities
- Diminished sexual drive
- Frequent anger and irritability
- Forgetfulness and impaired concentration
- A sense of guilt at surviving

Self-Help Techniques

Don't push thoughts and memories of the event away; talk about them. Don't feel embarrassed about a repetitious need to talk to people.

Keep your life in balance by:

- Maintaining a healthful diet and getting adequate sleep and exercise
- Balancing your work with recreation and rest
- Avoiding new major projects in life
- Keeping a routine with family, close friends, and familiar surroundings

Seeking Help

Do not hesitate to contact behavioral health consultants or the Employee Assistance Program when any of the following occur:

- You or your family have questions regarding what you are feeling.
- You notice any significant changes in family patterns.
- You are suddenly experiencing new physical aches or pains or the aggravation of a physical illness. (You might be expressing emotional discomfort through your body.)
- Your normal sleep is significantly disrupted.
- You are bothered by persistent sadness, irritability, or nervousness.
- Your use of alcohol or sleep aids increases.
- A gradual reduction in symptoms does not occur.

Everyone, especially managers and those in HR, should be extra sensitive to the needs and problems of employees. Managers should be aware of unusual behavioral trends or problems developing in your department. If you spot a problem, immediately refer the person to a trained professional who can help with the identification of the problem and then work to solve it. This can be a resource in HR or an employee assistance program resource.

If you're a manager, you need to work with the human resources staff and the EAP counselor (if you have elected to use that service) to determine whether it would be best to put the employee on a short – e.g., one month – leave of absence to give the individual time for counseling and recovery. Upon the employee's return, sit down together and work out performance expectations reasonable and fair both to the employee and to the employer.